



What people think,  
feel and do



ICRIR

# NI Baseline Polling – Phase 1 Qualitative Focus Groups



Key findings

19 December 2023



## OPINIUM RESEARCH

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# Project details

PROJECT NUMBER	UK24733
PROJECT NAME	NI Baseline Polling – Phase 1 Qualitative Focus Groups
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SAMPLE	Group 1 – Nationalists, 10 Participants Group 2 – General Population, 11 Participants Group 3 – Unionists, 8 Participants
FIELDWORK DATES	December 6 <sup>th</sup> – 7 <sup>th</sup> 2023

## Methodology & Sample

### Who did we speak to?

We conducted 3 focus groups with 29 Northern Irish participants in December 2023. Recruitment was conducted by LucidTalk. The focus groups were text-based groups where participants completed a range of activities and responded via chat only. The additional level of anonymity enabled participants to feel more comfortable being open about their opinions given the subject matter that was being explored.

	No. participants attended	Gender Split	Age Split	Experience with The Troubles	Area split
<b>Group 1 – Nationalist</b>	10	6x Female 5x Male	1x 25-34 years 3x 35-44 years 2x 45-54 years 2x 55-64 years 2x 65+	9x Yes 1x No/Prefer not to say	4x Rural 5x Urban 2x Suburban
<b>Group 2 – General Population</b>	11	6x Male 5x Female	1x 18-24 years 3x 35-44 years 1x 45-54 years 5x 55-64 years 1x 65+	7x Yes 4x No/Prefer not to say	3x Rural 3x Urban 5x Suburban
<b>Group 3 - Unionist</b>	8	3x Female 5x Male	4x 25-34 years 2x 45-54 years 1x 55-64 years 1x 65+	7x Yes 1x No/Prefer not to say	4x Rural 1x Urban 3x Suburban

## Awareness & Perception of The Commission

### Awareness of The Commission is high among participants

Among most participants in Northern Ireland, there were high levels of general knowledge of either a new process to promote reconciliation or the existence of The Commission. However, general population participants who are less politically engaged are less likely to have heard of The Commission. Participants heard about The Commission through a range of sources including:

- New Decade New Approach agreement being published
- Mainstream news outlets including newspapers and TV e.g., BBC Newsline and Radio Ulster
- Victims Organisations
- Personal contacts in political parties

- House of Lords Debates
- Social media

Nonetheless, among those who have heard of The Commission, their knowledge of its aims and remit can be muddy.

*“From my perspective, I understand the purpose is to provide a platform where those impacted by the troubles either a victim or perpetrators can disclose all information without fear of persecution as was done in South Africa. But I question the power of the ICRIR to hold bodies to account e.g. the government to release all documents.” - Nationalist, 35-44, Experience of Troubles*

## However, participant perception of the aims of The Commission is negative

While there is hope among some participants that in the future there will be more truth uncovered through this process and a sense of finality to The Troubles, participants also highlight concerns about the proposed process.

Most importantly, participants identify that the task set before the ICRIR is challenging and some are unsure how the objectives of uncovering through conducting reviews and promoting reconciliation operate in tandem. Further clarity on the aims and how The Commission plans to achieve them could help to alleviate concerns among participants and the wider public.

Many participants cling to the perceived unsuccessful outcomes of former inquiries and believe that the objectives of The Commission do not go far enough for them to feel confident that there will be a substantive positive change in Northern Ireland.

Further, some participants assume that due to the ICRIR's position as a statutory body, it is liable to be influenced by political parties or individual parties. Additionally, there is concern that it does not have the power to conduct investigations into individuals or organisations compared to other bodies (e.g. PSNI). There is particular concern about organisations that are outside Northern Ireland that may be required to submit information and their willingness to participate or be obliged to participate in the process.

Regarding reconciliation, participants question how this process will promote reconciliation at any level and instead express that it may dig or rake into the past instead of highlighting how it will work with existing grassroots organisations to build community relationships and expand current work.

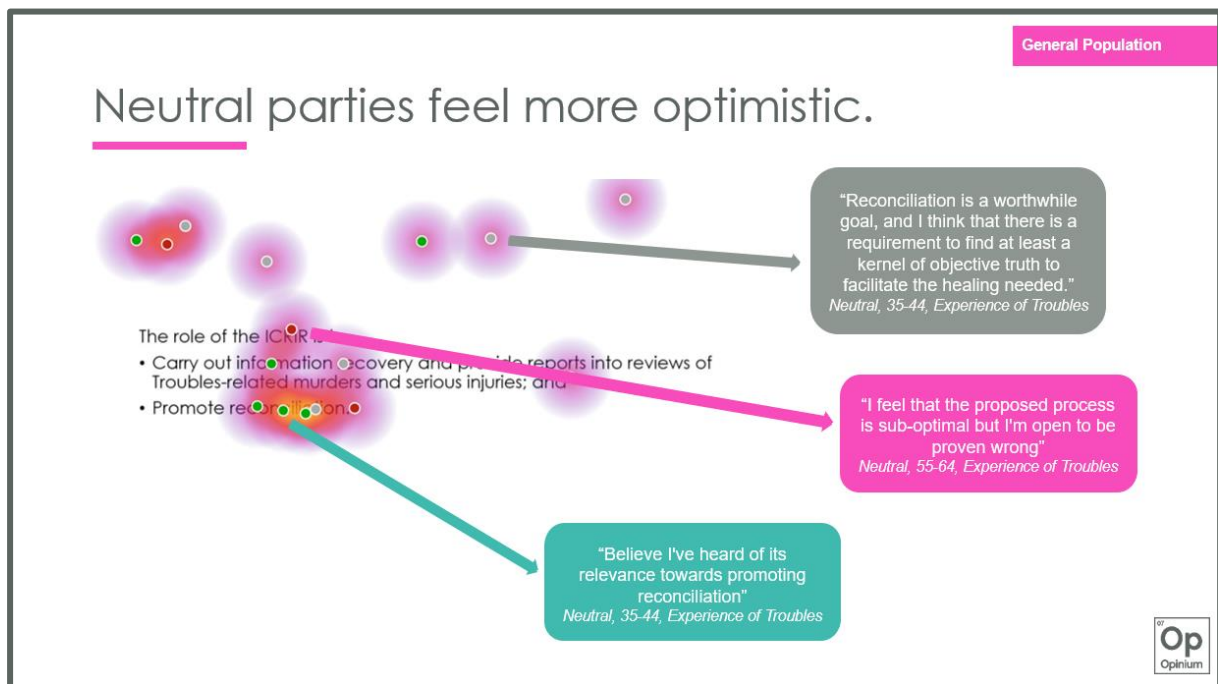
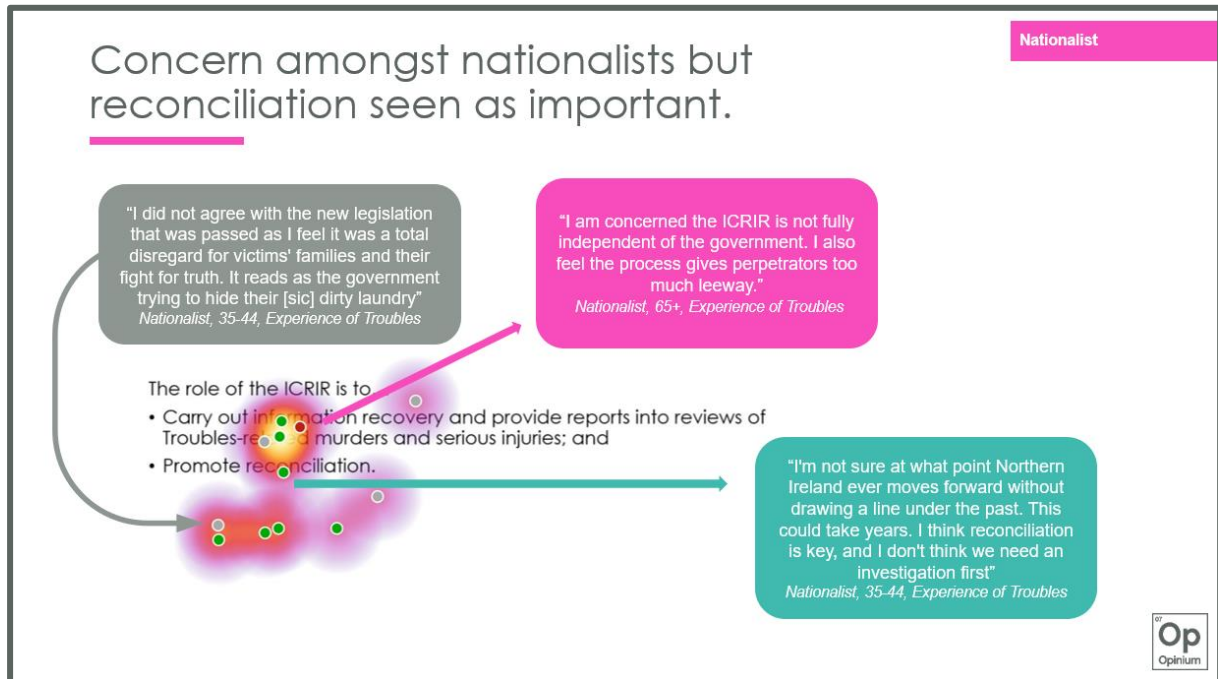
*“Is it reconciliation specifically between relatives of murdered/injured people and those who carried out the deeds, or reconciliation more widely?” – Unionist, 25-34, Experience of Troubles*

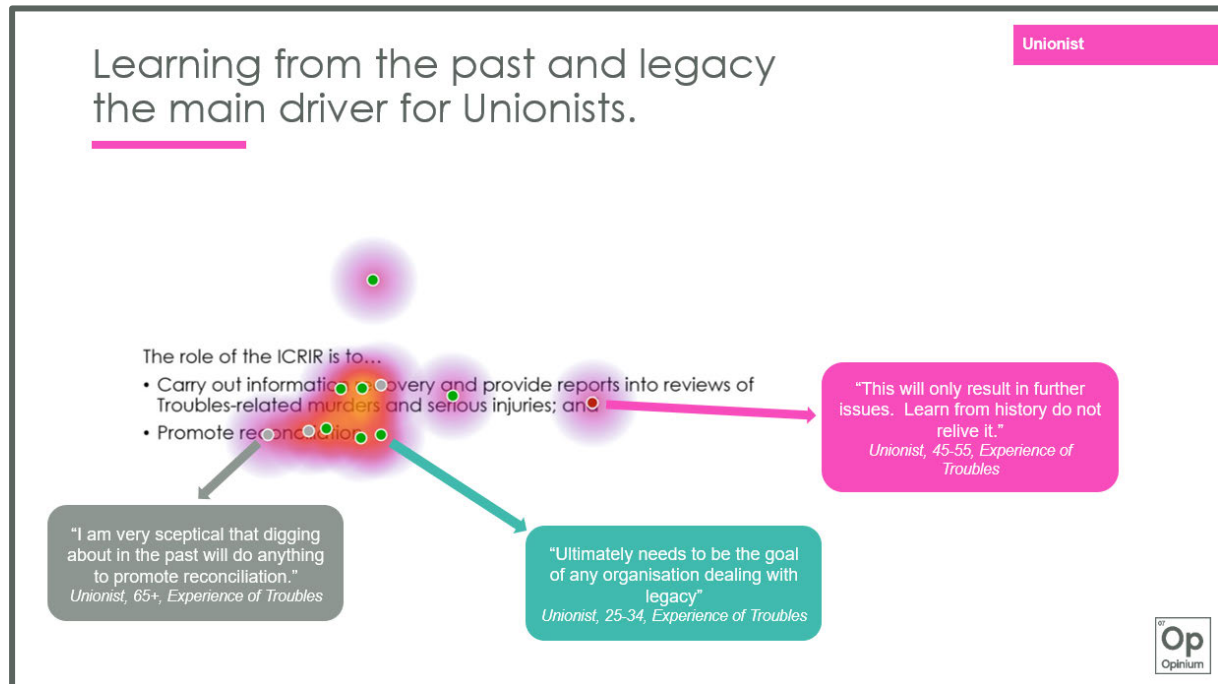
*“The main aim should be to learn and move on, I'd be concerned that this type of process prolongs animosity rather than increasing integration” – Unionist, 25-34, No Experience of Troubles*

*“Lots of unanswered "how's" - how will they carry out information recovery? How will they promote reconciliation? I guess if I was a potential contributor even if I knew of them, I would be thinking what might the consequences to me be?” – General Population, 35-44, Experience of Troubles*

*I think it's kept vague deliberately so that its success will be difficult to measure. – Nationalist, 55-64.  
Experience of Troubles*

Figure 1 – 3 Role of the ICIR Heatmaps





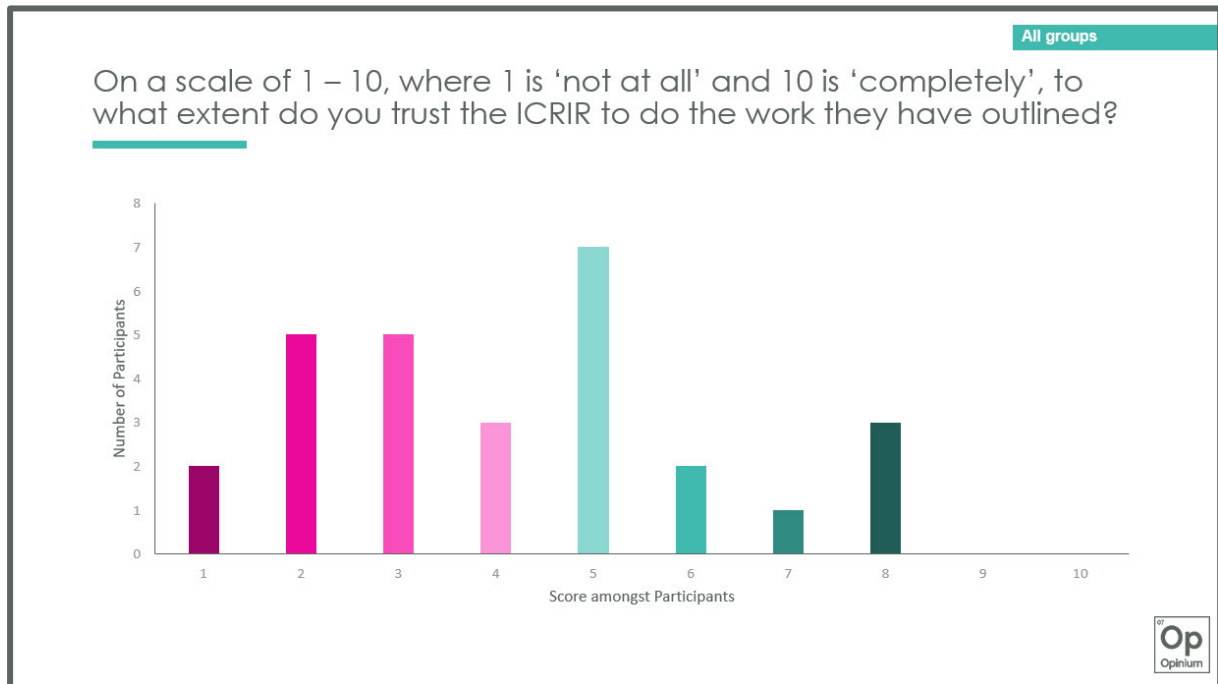
## Exploration of the process

Low levels of trust that The Commission will pay the local community anything more than lip service

Reflecting on its aims and position to conduct public inquiries, there are low levels of trust in The Commission from participants who took part in the focus groups.

Figure 4 Ranking Trust of the ICRIR





*"I'd say I trust the ICRIR itself, but I think it's already somewhat damned because of how it came into existence." – General Population, 45-54, Experience of Troubles*

Participants suggested the following to help increase levels of trust and transparency:

- Ensuring that both governments are on board, including in the provision of relevant information for all parties involved in The Troubles for The Commission's reviews.
- If possible, an independent body to conduct the reconciliation e.g., using academic experts, conflict resolution experts from The Hague or an external commissioner to oversee the process.
- If it operates as a statutory body, ensuring The Commission operates separately from the British government, politicians and civil servants who work there are independent.
- Information on the process for identifying and recruiting staff members to confirm that political allegiance will not unduly influence the outcome of the review process.
- Providing access to outputs from the process to the public e.g., reports from the reviews and general productivity of The Commission.

## The Commission is not seen as operating independently of the UK government

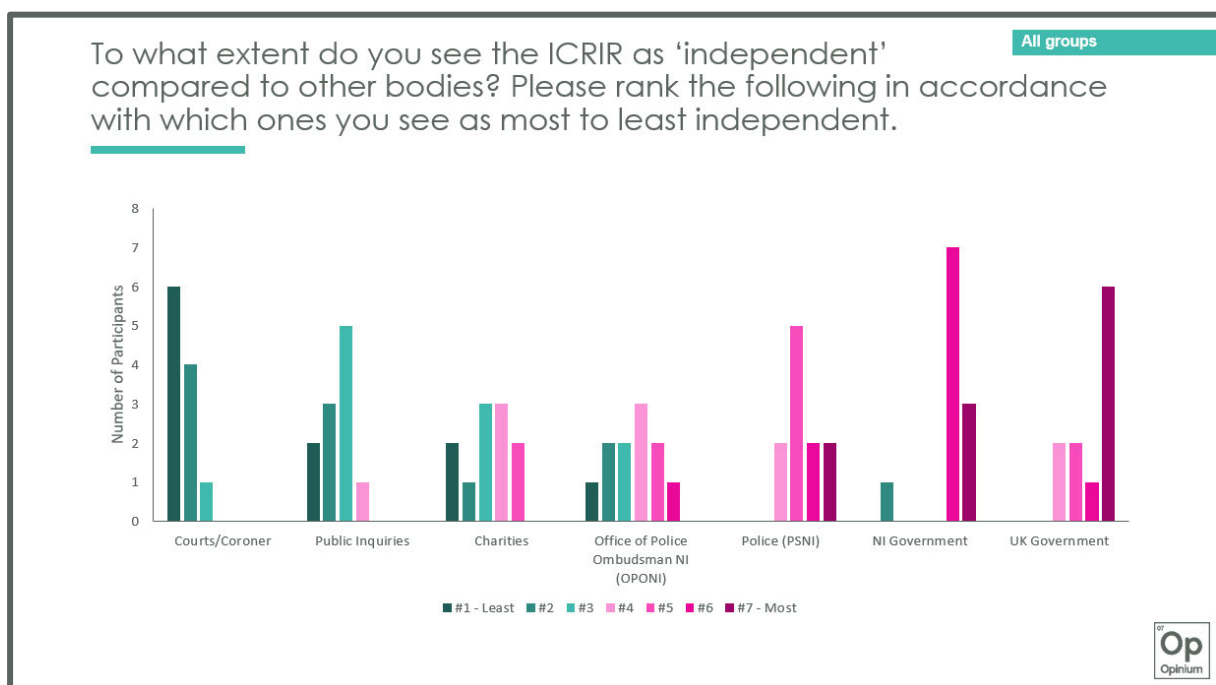
Most participants do not consider public inquiries as being independent and as a result neither do they consider The Commission as being independent of government. Instead, they would prefer The Commission to operate as a non-statutory body and for strict checks and balances to be put in place for any employees. It is important for those behind the organisation not to appear to have a personal stake in its outcome so that members of the public can freely participate.

However, most have elevated levels of trust in *the law* including the Court system as they rely on evidence provided to them and have proven systems in place. This is most important in the nationalist groups who place a high value on the *truth*, including in this process with The Commission.

Whereas a minority saw charities as tied to the desires of their funders and therefore unable to operate independently, decreasing the levels of trust they had for these organisations. This is important to understand for any partner organisations that The Commission will work with.

Conversely, the Government is not trusted to follow through on its promises. Recent examples mentioned include the Hillsborough Inquiry where the recommendations are not seen to go far enough according to participants despite the amount of time which has passed. These feelings are mirrored for participants when they reflect on their personal and community experiences of The Troubles.

*Figure 5 Ranking Independence of the ICRIR*



*“Judges sitting in court - I have a fair degree of trust. Once appointed to head a public inquiry - drops to ZERO.” – Unionist, 65+, Experience of Troubles*

*“[The] courts/coroner run off empirical evidence and aren't as likely to be affected by politics and emotion.” – General Population, 18-24, No Experience of Troubles*

*“Relatively few people want or expect justice in the courts. But the truth about what happened and why is so important to them.” – Nationalist, 65+, Experience of Troubles*

*“The UK Gov't is completely compromised, and it pulls the strings of the other organisations. I believe, as far as information recovery and powers of accountability, the Ombudsman is the most independent.” – Nationalist, 35-44, Experience of Troubles*



## Commissioners should balance expediting the process with not dragging it out to ensure engagement in the inquiry

Participants would like to have more of a rationale on why the 5-year term has been put in place to review cases to better understand the processes of The Commission.

- Timeline is **too short** – These participants would like more time for The Commission to conduct thorough investigations and ensure that justice is served for victims and survivors or their families, particularly for those who have been waiting for a long time. A minority state that this could work in favour of those who are unwilling to come forward. Conversely, others note that it provides time for members of the public who are not ready yet to come forward due to the trauma of reliving their experience.
- Timeline is **just right** – Other participants express that due to the amount of time that has passed, the inquiry should be drawn to a close enabling those who are elderly to give evidence and to draw a line under everything that has occurred. For these participants, this timeline demonstrates that The Commission can build on existing investigations and prioritise cases where individuals come forward of their own volition.
- Timeline is **too long** – A minority of participants suggested that The Commission utilise a shorter 1-2 year time frame because in their opinion viable convictions would have already been pursued by previous inquiries and individuals were not likely to come forward with evidence who had not already done so at this point, even with the option of conditional immunity.

Some participants raised questions on the level and type of information available and what cases The Commission would focus on (e.g. British military involvement versus civilian). Increased information on these areas can help to provide transparency on the objectives of this inquiry.

A minority express concern about the amount of funds which have been used to conduct inquiries historically and will be used by this Commission, including ensuring there isn't a blank cheque being issued which some do not feel is in the public's interest. The main reasons are that it can be difficult to know who is eligible for a payout and the boundaries of historical investigations.

*"The main aim should be to learn and move on, I'd be concerned that this type of process prolongs animosity rather than increasing integration" – Unionist, 25-34, No Experience of Troubles*

*"Possibly controversial - draw a red line under the past at 1998. Blanket amnesty for everyone. Do not even teach the period in history for at least 50 years" – Unionist, 65+, Experience of Troubles*

*"I think there is a difficult balancing act - there is a need for society to move on some of those most affected aren't in a position too - especially if they haven't got anything representing closure" – Unionist, 25-34, Experience of Troubles*

*"I feel that the real aim is to keep kicking the can down the road until there's no one left alive who cares or can be held responsible." – Nationalist, 55-64, Experience of Troubles*

*"I wonder that it might be used as a tool/excuse not to follow up on specific, sensitive investigations" – Nationalist, 55-64, Experience of Troubles*

## Cases should be assessed rather than prioritised using a flexible approach

Overall, participants were strongly against the cab rank system and instead decided it was important that cases were not prioritised using a strict rubric but that The Commission employees adapted their approach based on the case.

1. Chronologically – This option was felt to help to ensure that older cases which have been open for an extended period of time are not prolonged any further and instead prosecution pursued, or information made available to victims and/or their families.
2. Cab Rank – This option is seen to provide a platform for those who are the most comfortable with coming forward either to request a review or share their role. This was seen to be important to provide as an option, but not prioritised to ensure that those who were not ready/willing were not penalised.
3. Prosecution and/or danger to life – Some participants believe it is the role of The Commission to identify these cases and prioritise when necessary due to the subject matter. However, there is pessimism that due to the length of time that has passed the number of cases which fit into this category is low.
4. Case characteristics – This method would take into consideration the complexity and variation between different cases and give some assurance that the resource of The Commission is being used effectively rather than applying a strict process.

When considering the prioritisation of cases, participants highlight areas that are more important to them for The Commission to consider such as victim impact,

*“Priority should go those waiting the longest for answers or those who approach first” – Nationalist, 45-54, Experience of Troubles*

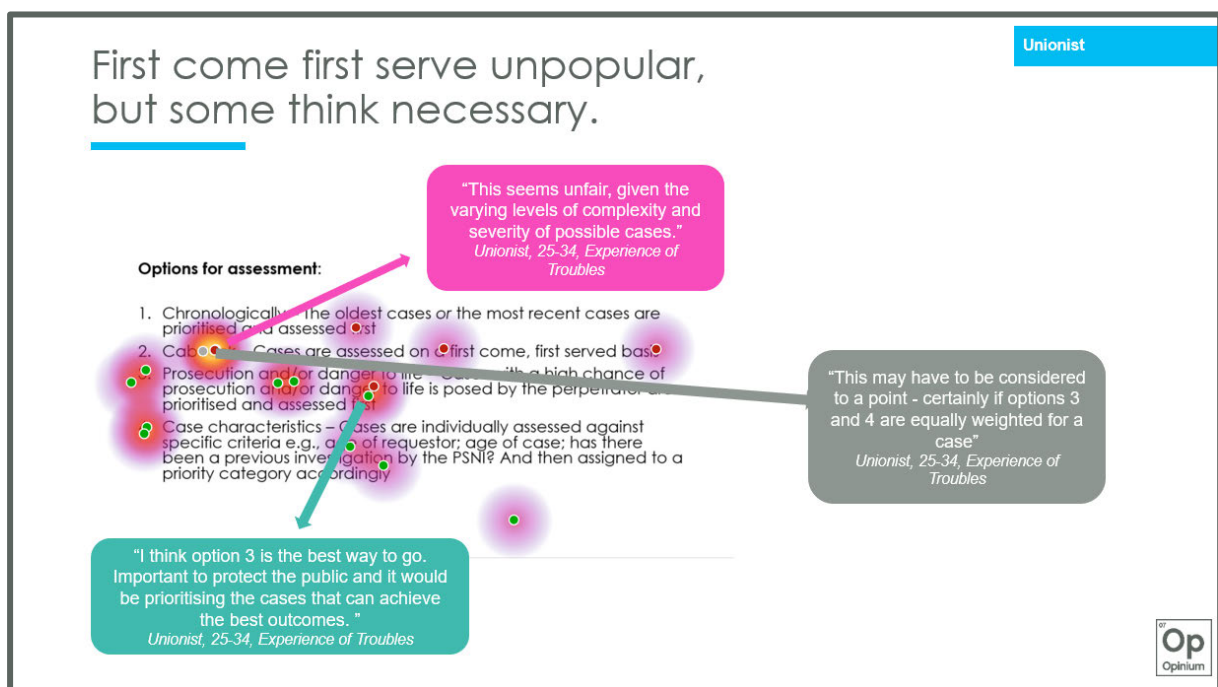
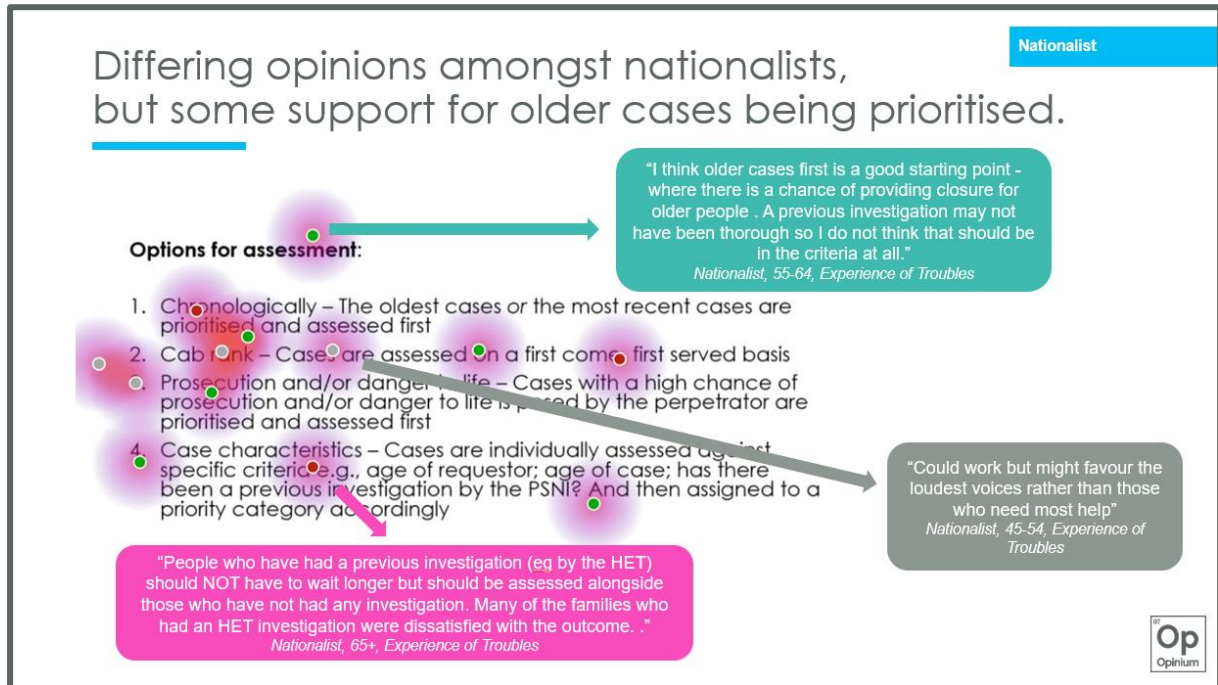
*“I think option 3 is the best way to go. Important to protect the public and it would be prioritising the cases that can achieve the best outcomes” – Unionist, 25-34, Experience of Troubles*

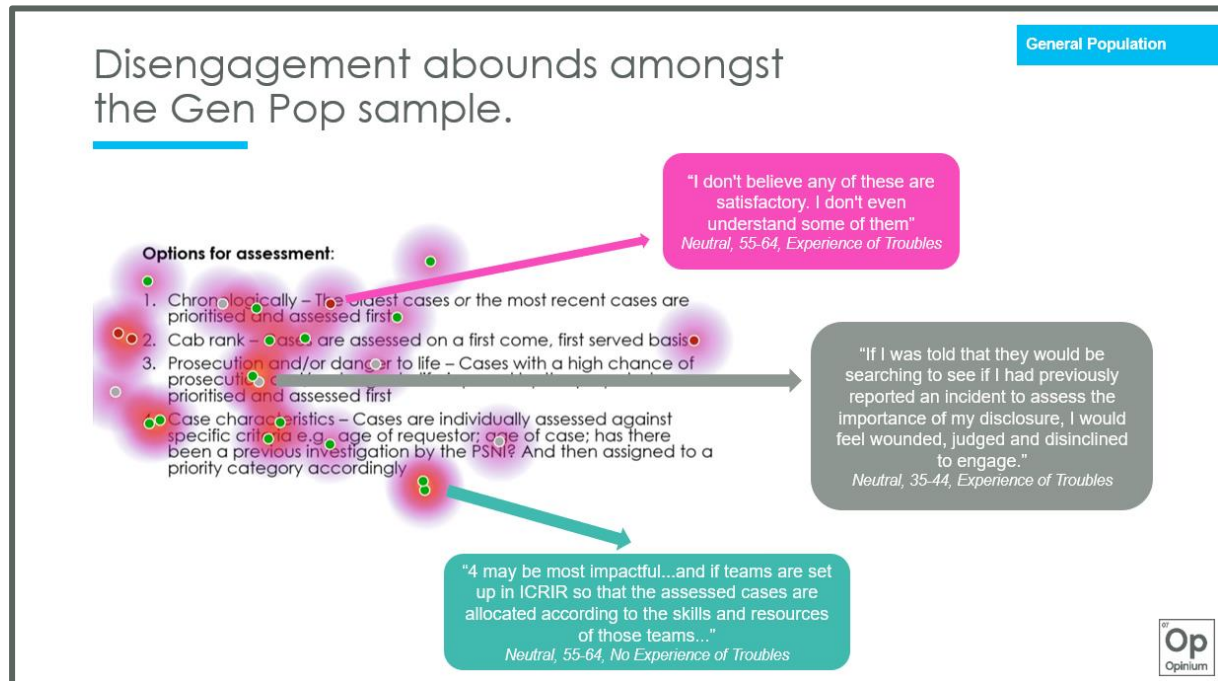
*“Every case is different and should be assessed on its own merits” – General Population, 35-44, Experience of Troubles*

*“The oldest case should be assessed first so that applicants see some outcome” – General Population, 55-64, Experience of Troubles*

*“I think oldest cases first is a good starting point – where there is a chance of providing closure for older people. A previous investigation may not have been thorough so don’t think that should be in the criteria at all” – Nationalist, 55-64, Experience of Troubles*

Figure 6-8 Proposed Options for Assessment





## The potential consequences of conditional immunity do not outweigh the potential positives

When discussing conditional immunity participants articulate the degree of benefit it could provide to both The commission in encouraging individuals to come forward and families in their grief process. Many recognise that the act of granting conditional immunity, and in turn, accessing additional information can have both benefits and consequences simultaneously e.g., in theory, additional information could bring closure to one family whilst the process of gaining it devastates another.

For most, conditional immunity is a way for perpetrators to 'get off' and will prevent families from having closure if perpetrators go unpunished, particularly if they have been waiting for a long time. Responses are emotionally charged as participants reflect on past experiences within their own networks and their wider communities.

Additionally, some reflect back that The Commission offering conditional immunity could be perceived as them valuing the information from perpetrators over victims who approach The Commission, enabling perpetrators to gain a level of control and spotlight over the process. The Nationalist group, in particular, dislike the possibility of perpetrators avoiding prosecution and voices their lack of faith in its success.

*"Put the victims' family at the heart of all decision-making. Give them control, not the perpetrator" – Nationalist, 65+, Experience of Troubles*

*"[It is important to consider] the victims' wishes, do they want to prosecute, or fact find?" – Nationalist, 35-44, Experience of Troubles*

*"The ICRIR has been cunningly devised to give the impression of genuine truth-seeking. But in giving perpetrators a "carrot" and no "stick" and in retaining a role for the Secretary of State, it is holed beneath the waterline." – Nationalist, 65+, Experience of Troubles*

*“There has to be a willingness for those people in those bodies to come forward and admit to what they’ve done and it’s difficult to see very many of them doing this, even with the promise they won’t be prosecuted” – Nationalist, 45-54, Experience of Troubles*

*“Totally opposed to immunity for any government agents (military/police) or for any crime they were proven to be involved with (i.e. collusion with paramilitaries)” – Nationalist, 35-44, Experience of Troubles*

*“Uneasy. People lie, I understand the intent behind this, but I do not think it will work” – Nationalist, 55-64, Experience with ‘Troubles*

Others talk pragmatically, evaluating what may be required for the commission to progress as they recognise the key role conditional immunity could play in information retrieval. These participants suggest it would incentivise people to come forward. Still expressing discomfort and disappointment at the need for an incentive, the ‘conditional’ element provides some assurance to them. The acceptance of conditional immunity comes tied with a resigned hope that new information could finally bring resolution and ultimately start the end of the trauma and years of ongoing investigations.

*“Disappointed that this is what it has come to, but resigned to this probably now being the ‘least worst’ option” – General Population, 45-54, No Experience of Troubles*

*“A little sick, yet I recognise the benefits” – General Population, 35-44, Experience of Troubles*

*“I would be fine with this, given immunity could be revoked” – General Population, 35-44, Experience of Troubles*

*“Not happy but a necessary evil, provided it is conditional on the information being factual and helpful” – Unionist, 45-54, Experience of Troubles*

*“Uncomfortable, but it may be a case of choosing between truth and justice for many families as the possibility of getting both may be very slim” – Unionist, 25-34, Experience of Troubles*

*“Uneasy but content if it leads to a successful resolution for the victim involved” – Unionist, 25-34, Experience of Troubles*

## Victim support is an integral component of any public inquiry

When contacting The Commission, participants believe that individuals should have to speak to as few members of staff as possible. This includes having access to a central point of contact for any questions, concerns, or progress updates, likened to a Police Family Liaison Officer.

This would help assure participants that elements of a case would not be overlooked due to being passed around and are also held securely, increasing trust for members of the public to come forward.

*“Hopefully 2-3, initial call handler then caseworker, maybe an extra person if off in extended leave or a complaint is lodged.” Unionist, 25-34, No Experience of Troubles*

Ensuring that victims are supported throughout the process is important to participants. This includes practical and psychological assistance due to the recognition that individuals may be re-traumatised by coming forward.



Many participants express a desire for consistent communication throughout the entirety of the review process and beyond. This would ensure individuals confidently understand any action taken and are aware of where the relevant support can be found. Regardless of the outcome or resolution, these participants believe that support should continue after a decision has been reached, taking into consideration the outcome may or may not be as expected and that appropriate support would assist in processing what that means for them.

The support system provided by The Commission would serve as a robust system of support that advocates for families and individuals who are committing to revisit a potentially upsetting period of their life, and who may also have little or no experience dealing with a professional investigator. The majority of participants express a need for multiple forms of support including impartial professionals with expertise in counselling, family therapy, and long-term trauma. Several participants suggest support should extend beyond the individual directly involved in the case to also include family members who have the potential to be impacted and The Commission staff members who are immersed in sensitive subject areas for a prolonged period.

*“Having to repeat details of trauma over and over to different people could either re-traumatise or encourage rumination. It should be avoided - a central coordinator is crucial.” Unionist, 65+, Experience of Troubles*

*“In SA, they kept trauma counsellors on site, and had local befrienders available for continued support in case of re-traumatisation.” – General Population, 35-44, Experience of Troubles*

*“The real danger is that no genuine healing will come out of any of this. So many people have gone to their graves with broken hearts and unanswered questions. How can we be sure that thousands more won’t follow them despite this commission’s lofty aims?” – Nationalist, 55-64, Experience of Troubles*

## Considerations for Phase 2

- Dial-up The Commission’s role in providing a living history for future generations so that they understand the positive influence The Commission will have – not just another inquiry digging up the past.

*“History is there to be learned from not relived” – Unionist, 45-54, Experience of Troubles*

*“A balance needs to be struck between not exacerbating tensions and disharmony between communities, and the need for justice of some kind being done/history being learned from.” – Unionist, 25-34, Experience of Troubles*

- Amplify the powers The Commission will /will not have to obtain information from previous investigations and compel witnesses to provide assurance of the power and influence they will have.
- Explain the rationale for the 5-year process to receive information and how The Commission will function after that.



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